

## Narrating the Non-Nation: Literary Journalism and “Illegal” Border Crossings

THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY HAS BEEN HAILED AS ushering in a new era of globalization and “post-nationalism,” in which the nation-state is becoming an increasingly “obsolete” category (Appadurai 169). Such grand claims are belied, however, by the strong wave of resurgent nativism in the U.S. that has accompanied immigration reform debates of the last decade—most recently manifested in Arizona’s notorious SB 1070 and similar legislative efforts in other states<sup>1</sup>—as well as by the accompanying escalation in “boundary enforcement” at the U.S.-Mexican border (Nevins 158–59). As immigration spiked to ever higher numbers in the 1990s and early 2000s in the wake of NAFTA, policy enforcement “crack-downs” suggested a new level of border policing. Operation Hold-the-Line in 1993 and Operation Gatekeeper in 1994 implemented more rigorous enforcement at highly populated points such as San Diego and El Paso, driving border crossers through less populous areas and harsh desert conditions (Eschbach 4, 9). These developments resulted in large numbers of immigrant deaths due to dehydration, suffocation, hypothermia, and hyperthermia. The United States Government Accountability Office reports that border crossing deaths as a whole more than doubled between 1995 and 2005, although this increase was not accompanied by a corresponding rise in illegal entries.

In response, the last decade has seen a flurry of books on the subject of undocumented immigrant crossings and deaths including: *Dead in their Tracks: Crossing America’s Desert Borderlands* (1999) by John

Annerino; *Crossing Over: A Mexican Family on the Migrant Trail* (2001) by Rubén Martínez; *The Devil's Highway* (2004) by Luis Alberto Urrea; *Dying to Cross: The Worst Immigrant Tragedy in American History* (2005) by Jorge Ramos; *Enrique's Journey: The Story of a Boy's Dangerous Odyssey to Reunite With His Mother* (2006) by Sonia Nazario; and *The Death of Josseline: Immigration Stories from the Arizona Borderlands* (2010) by Margaret Regan. These texts reframe the immigration debate through graphic narrative accounts of the human costs of our border policy, and they emphasize the pressing urgency of this crisis through the haunting leitmotif of border deaths.

The title of this essay clearly takes its cue from Homi Bhabha's postulation that "nation" (understood as a sense of collective peoplehood that is geographically bounded and claims the right to sovereignty) is brought into being largely by *stories*, including shared histories and myths as well as "literature." Because stories of nation generally strive for a sense of homogeneity, they inevitably obscure or leave out elements that do not easily fit into the "imagined community" (Benedict Anderson's famous coinage) of the nation. The now standard labeling of undocumented immigrants as "illegals" in mainstream media suggests the degree to which this population has been narratively constructed as *not fitting* into the boundaries of the American "nation"—indeed, as fundamentally threatening that nation. Perceptions of Latinos as a national threat, Leo R. Chavez argues, have been shaped by "a history of ideas, laws, narratives, myths, and knowledge production in social sciences, sciences, the media, and the arts" that constitute a powerful set of "discursive formations" (22; Hall 6, qtd. in Chavez). In the wake of 9/11, titles linking immigration to threats to America's national security and even survival have proliferated.<sup>2</sup>

The authors of the border-crossing texts that I examine here clearly seek to intervene in this strident narrative of immigration as a threat to the existence of the nation by offering alternative narratives in which undocumented people are *not* imagined, first and foremost, as "aliens." These texts offer counter-discourses, reframing the story of immigration in terms that tend to shift the focus from the borders of "our" imagined community, to construct alternative notions of ethical communities. As works of literary journalism, these accounts capitalize on a culture in which "life narratives" have become not only instrumental in discourses on human rights, but also eminently marketable (Schaf-

fer and Smith 7, 25, 27). The current popularity of life writing suggests the degree to which these books might be instrumental in advocacy by reaching privileged readers (in this case, U.S. citizens) with the power to affect the course of policy through voting, campaign contributions, protests, e-mails to congressional representatives, and other forms of pressure. It is precisely the question of what role these texts might play in a larger project of soliciting readers to such forms of pro-immigrant civic responses, in our age of heightened nationalist rhetoric, that I wish to address. And I am particularly interested in noting how, despite obvious pro-immigrant sympathies, such texts might reinstate a problematic politics of place that diffuses a sense of urgency and crisis needing address.

In *Can Literature Promote Justice?*, Kimberly Nance has considered the ways in which literary representations of crisis might spur ethical responses on the part of Western readers. Looking at the Latin American genre of *testimonio*, Nance observes that identification, or empathy, is a crucial starting point in reorienting readers from an alienating distance to involvement. In a similar vein, John Beverley has suggested that “The complicity a *testimonio* establishes with its readers involves *their identification*—by engaging their sense of ethics and justice—with a popular cause normally distant, not to say alien, from their immediate experience” (37, emphasis added).

Yet it will come as no surprise that there also exists profound scholarly wariness, if not skepticism, about the political project of soliciting identification. Doris Sommer, in her discussions of *testimonio*, has been deeply suspicious of identification and empathy (“No Secrets” 131; “Taking a Life” 926). Nance, glossing Bakhtin’s concept of “exotopy,” adds, “When empathy is conceived as an end in itself, rather than only a preliminary to ethical action, there is no expectation of ever returning to one’s own place. . . . [leaving] the reader with[out] any compelling standpoint for action” (*Can Literature* 128; Nance cites Lerner, 76–77, 128). Only by returning to our particular subject positions, Nance insists, can we “consider the unique ways in which that position enables [us] to assist others” (63).

Needless to say, these discussions have obvious implications for texts which narrate, to a U.S. readership, stories of unauthorized immigrants, almost invariably imagined by U.S. audiences as the non-nation: not properly belonging to it, even when they are located

within its geographical borders. In what follows, I analyze three texts by U.S. Chicano/as and Latino/as, Martínez's *Crossing Over*, Nazario's *Enrique's Journey*, and Urrea's *The Devil's Highway*, as particularly salient accounts that present counter-hegemonic narratives of unauthorized immigration. While none of these texts are *testimonios* (understood as first-person accounts of "witnesses" of crisis and repression),<sup>3</sup> they do share some underlying similarities.<sup>4</sup> Like *testimonio*, they call attention to an urgent crisis which requires intervention in the present moment; like *testimonio*, they ask us to hear the voices of the subaltern that are usually unheard.<sup>5</sup>

All three books clearly seek to make a contribution to the current, vociferous immigration debates and have received notable critical attention and praise.<sup>6</sup> All three have been positioned in terms of their sympathetic reframing of the issue by the media,<sup>7</sup> as well as by immigrant advocacy groups such as *No Más Muertes / No More Deaths* (on whose volunteer training list of recommended reading all three books have appeared). In what follows, I consider some of the ways in which these accounts address and solicit their imagined U.S. readers. While anti-immigrant activism frequently adopts the rhetoric of national defense and patriotism, the narratives I examine here are notable for their engagements with a more generalized rhetoric of humanism and human rights that resists dominant constructs of the "nation," encouraging readers to "identify" with migrants who are normally treated as ethnic and cultural "others" in dominant discourse. Nonetheless, the invitation to readerly identification with the subaltern brings its own grave pitfalls for projects of immigrant advocacy. Further, all three texts are still firmly located in a politics of nation; in different ways they paradoxically also function to interpellate U.S. readers within their national "place."

#### GLOBALIZATION AND TRANSNATIONALISM: 'CROSSING OVER'

Rubén Martínez's lengthy chronicle *Crossing Over: A Mexican Family on the Migrant Trail* (2001) takes migrant deaths while crossing the border as his point of departure—specifically the deaths of three brothers of the Chávez family, from the tiny Mexican town of Cherán, along with five other migrants killed in a high speed border patrol chase. Martínez's story turns its attention away from these deaths fairly quickly,

however, to focus on the surviving family members, several of whom subsequently come to the U.S. themselves. Through their intertwined stories, as well as a whole host of other individual “cameos,” *Crossing Over* delineates the circuits of capital and labor under late twentieth-century globalization that have profoundly impacted even small, indigenous towns like Cherán, creating deeply entrenched migration patterns but also “assimilating” remote indigenous peoples to “American” ways of life before they have even arrived in the United States. Martínez’s narrative, then, suggests the degree to which immigrants are “familiar,” to us—are, indeed, only another version of “Americans.”

Like their U.S. counterparts, the text suggests, undocumented immigrants are participating in the “American Dream”: “one of the defining characteristics of the American middle class is the ideal and practice of mobility in pursuit of the bigger house, the nicer neighborhood, the family vacation, and a golden retirement. In this sense, the Enríquezes are profoundly American” (115). Like “us,” Cherán migrants want amenities that signal an upwardly mobile, middle-class standard of living: “The Cortéz kitchen [in St. Louis, Missouri] is equipped with a microwave oven, an Osterizer food processor, and an electric can opener. . . . The nineteen-inch RCA TV receives, via cable hooked up for a small fee . . . HBO, Showtime, and Cinemax” (279). On some level migrants are “just like us”; like (U.S.) Americans, they share the same dreams of middle-class aspirations, and therefore are themselves “profoundly American.” Readers, that is, are invited to identify with the undocumented via their consumerism.

Such a possibility of identification clearly blunts discourses that suggest recent waves of migrants are anti-assimilationist or unassimilable (Chavez, “Let Us Say” 37–40). Indeed, these communities, Martínez implies, started “assimilating” to American lifestyles while they were still in Mexico. Nonetheless, an identification on the basis of middle-class amenities provides highly problematic grounds on which to construct a counter-hegemonic vision of imagined community. Martínez’s extended representation of middle-class aspirations to some degree already achieved by revolving-door migrants in Cherán diffuses any sense of urgency that need be addressed. For one thing, *Crossing Over* underscores that these movements of people and culture have already happened and are here to stay; but as Nance notes, such a sense of inevitability “appear[s] virtually guaranteed to let the general reader off

the hook" (*Can Literature* 92). For another, the narrative of the "American Dream," in itself, makes no particular demands on readers. Although effective testimonial effects rely on persuading readers that the subjects represented "are actually suffering in this situation" (Nance 74), consumerism suggests ambition, not suffering. In the absence of crisis, why ought we to rethink our deeply held notions of nation? One can well imagine the resistant response: "What? We're supposed to let in millions of 'illegals' so that they can have big-screen TVs and nice cars?" The narrative of middle-class aspiration and the American Dream invites identification without positing any particular sense of ethical responsibility.

The identificatory impulse in *Crossing Over*, furthermore, is accompanied by an opposing but more subtle thrust in the text: the exoticizing of the immigrant "informants." In many ways, even while working very hard to redraw the imagined boundaries of the nation, the text distances readers from the plight of migrants that it portrays. Perhaps the most profound of these is the strong visibility of the journalistic eye, combined with a recurring emphasis on observation of the indigenous "other" culture in Cherán, which potentially underscores the distance between Anglo-American readers and the migrants. In Martínez's depiction of Cherán, readers are repeatedly solicited to identify not so much with the migrants themselves—who are inhabiting and adapting an "ancient" indigenous culture that is sure to be perceived as quite "other" to most Anglo-Americans—but with the observing perspective of Martínez, the interlocutor-journalist, who both documents and exoticises this culture. Martínez describes, for example, how the local "*bruja*" or witch (the term used in the text for indigenous healers) will treat a baby's cough by "work[ing] her white magic against the black that's gotten hold of the child . . . . She'll seek out a friendly eagle or owl to take hold of and fly . . . directly to the child's bedroom, where she will reappear in her grandmotherly form, placing the palm of her hand on the child's forehead to cast out the blackness" (80). Such ethnographic details, arguably, encourage not empathy or exotopy but *absenting* on the reader's part:

Absenting assumes an incommensurable difference between speaker [or subject] and reader, an uncrossable distance across which it is prohibitively difficult or even impossible to communicate. Absenting may be facilitated by critiques that empha-

size the localization of [subjects] in their own cultural and geographic contexts, to the point of isolation. (Nance, *Can Literature* 55)

Martínez's magical, shape-shifting witch "frames the 'other' as fantastically exotic" (Sklodowska, "Spanish" 93), and thus "fetishize[s] otherness" (Yúdice 57). Rendering the subaltern in the eminently consumable terms of magical realism, this representation works against serious engagement with difference.

Martínez's explicit and frequently intrusive presence in the text, as interviewer, observer, commentator, and not-quite-participant, also adds a layer of distancing between subject and reader. Martínez's own perspective and position often intrudes into the text; but unlike narrators of *testimonios*, who are both witness to and participant in the injustices being recounted and serve as a synecdoche for a larger collective, Martínez's observing presence is always rhetorically set apart from those he is writing about. This is, ironically, never more the case than when Martínez is actually attempting to engage in "participatory journalism," in which he will experience what his subjects experience—such as in his attempts to accompany a group of migrants and a Coyote across the border in an "illegal" crossing. When he is told that the group "probably won't leave until after Christmas," he "mull[s] it over. Wait another ten days in Cherán or head to L.A. to spend Christmas with my family? . . . Family wins out. I'll be back a couple of days after Christmas,' I tell him" (174). This choice is one marked by privilege; unlike the migrants who must wait until the Coyote is ready to cross illegally, Martínez can cross the border at any time. He can go "home" to L.A. for Christmas, and then cross back for his stint as an unauthorized migrant. The incident both highlights the distance between Martínez's position and that of his subjects and takes the focus off of the undocumented migrant experience, inviting readerly identification instead with Martínez, the Mexican American journalist-observer, in his casual deliberations to go or to stay. Not surprisingly, he misses the migrants' departure and does not accompany them.

#### NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND: 'ENRIQUE'S JOURNEY'

*Enrique's Journey*, about a Honduran teenager who works his way through Mexico and into the United States to be reunited with his mother, makes its social agenda explicit from the start. Nazario claims

to want to “humanize” immigrants coming to the U.S. in order to make them more than just “cost-benefit ratios” in the reader’s mind (xiv). That is, she wants to reframe the immigration issue in such a way that strict financial calculations, such as use of social services which cost “U.S. taxpayers” money, need not be the sole or even the primary determinant of policies. This articulated goal implies that the desired response on the reader’s part is a change in attitude that will result in a change in “real” conditions, through decreased support for nativist, anti-immigrant legislation. The “troubles and triumphs” of immigrants, Nazario insists, are “a part of this country’s future” (xxv); in this way she reinscribes the undocumented within the boundaries of our nation’s imagined community.

Nazario’s narrative self-consciously emplots an “odyssey” of a young boy searching for his mother, encountering in the process life-threatening obstacle after obstacle. As in *testimonio* proper, Enrique’s experiences are synecdochic, meant to stand for a larger and generalized migrant experience. Boys like Enrique trying to hop trains heading north through Mexico face mutilation of limbs, if not death: “One loses a leg, another his hand; the third has been cut in half” (58). Nazario uses a catalog style to generalize the risk Enrique faces, detailing what happened to “one . . . another . . . a third” and punctuating a chronological string of months with the accidents that marked each: “In April, a Honduran broke his foot falling from the train. In May, a Honduran had a fractured right clavicle. In June, a Nicaraguan had a broken right rib. In July, a seventeen-year-old Honduran lost both legs” (58). The incantatory quality of the lists of broken bones and mutilations emphasizes a state of humanitarian crisis and underscores the representative nature of particular instances, pointing readers to the significant and generalized human costs of migration north.

Nazario clearly means to elicit a compassionate response to such suffering. To this end she includes an ethical exemplar in which she recounts unexpected aid coming from the most unlikely of places—poor rural Mexican communities surrounding the railroad tracks in Oaxaca and Veracruz: “Not long after seeing the statue of Jesus, Enrique is alone on a hopper. . . . He looks over the side. More than a dozen people, mostly women and children, are rushing out of their houses along the tracks, clutching small bundles” (103). The bundles, containing food,



water, and clothing, are thrown to the top of the train to aid the largely Central American migrants. The figurative connection to the statue of Jesus is unmistakable, but Nazario underscores it by including the religious rhetoric used by the locals to explain their acts of giving: "God says, when I saw you naked, I clothed you. When I saw you hungry, I gave you food. That is what God teaches" (106). In such justifications, state boundaries, national identities, and economic cost-benefit analyses are de-emphasized as the Mexican speakers make an imaginative leap to *identify* with Central American migrants, based on a much more amorphous "imagined community," often rendered metaphorically as "your neighbor." The deployment of such discourse by the Mexicans providing "aid" to *their* unauthorized migrants resonates strongly with the language used on the U.S. side of the border by groups such as Humane Borders, the New Sanctuary Movement, and *No Más Muertes* / No More Deaths which have, in the past decade, described their activities at the border in just such terms. (See for example Van Denburg; Interfaith Worker Justice). The scene of aid in Nazario's text dramatizes a faith-based and humanitarian response, rather than a nationalistic one, to unauthorized immigrants, and implicitly solicits readers to live up to this particular measure of the "good."

Yet, while on some level the text invites us to respond humanely to those risking their lives to cross the border, Nazario's solicitation of readerly identification with her subjects also falls prey to what Sommer calls the "dissolution of difference between reader and [subaltern subject]" and thus "cancels any need to appreciate a different interiority" ("Taking a Life" 921, 925). The ways in which Nazario structures her narrative suggest precisely the problems of which Sommer warns, I suggest, because Nazario ultimately betrays a remarkably "American" inability to understand and accept the decision of the Central American mother to leave her children.

On the face of it, Nazario clearly hopes to lead readers to understand how Mexican and Central American mothers—mothers who love their children—could "abandon" them to come to the U.S., precisely *out* of love for them. Nazario herself starts out in this position of incomprehension, as she signals through the opening of her text. She traces the origin of her project to a recollected conversation with her housekeeper, Carmen, in which Carmen revealed having left four children behind in Guatemala, twelve years before. The youngest was

only one year old at the time. "Twelve years? I react with disbelief. How can a mother leave her children and travel more than two thousand miles away, not knowing when or if she will ever see them again? What drove her to do this?" (x). Here Nazario posits *herself* as a former naive addressee to the story of children left behind. The task of her narrative will ostensibly be to explain how a loving mother could do such a thing to her children.

Carmen provides an answer in brief: "She worked hard but didn't earn enough to feed four children. . . . Many nights, they went to bed without dinner. She lulled them to sleep with advice on how to quell their hunger pangs. . . . She left for the United States out of love. She hoped she could provide her children an escape from their grinding poverty, a chance to attend school beyond the sixth grade" (xi). While Martínez's text invites identification via the immigrants' middle class aspirations and desires for U.S.-style consumerism, Nazario's opens by suggesting incommensurable difference between her subjects and her privileged readership; while "we" can afford to buy the book in our hands (and to read it in our leisure time), Nazario's subjects face "grinding poverty" and real "hunger pangs." Indeed, Carmen herself, anticipating American women's alienation from her understanding of her role as a mother, challenges, "What's really incomprehensible . . . are middle-class or wealthy working mothers in the United States. These women, she says, could tighten their belts, stay at home, spend all their time with their children. Instead, they devote most of their waking hours and energy to careers . . . . Why, she asks, with disbelief on her face, would anyone do that?" (xi). This early, framing scene highlights readerly estrangement; we (privileged readers) are not in Carmen's place; our circumstances are not hers; we do not understand her choices, nor does she, apparently, understand ours.

But, I would argue, Nazario's text ultimately does not invite a recognition of a *different* ethical system applicable under different conditions of existence. Instead, remarkably, it seems to confirm Nazario's early "verdict" that the mother's abandonment of her children is "wrong." The coda to Carmen's story is that her own son Minor undertook the dangerous journey north in the following year to find his mother. In Nazario's recounting, "Minor's friends in Guatemala envied the money and presents Carmen sent. . . . Minor answered, 'I'd trade it all for my

mother. . . . *You can never get the love of a mother from someone else*" (xii, emphasis added). Mother love, then, trumps economic advancement or social opportunities. By universalizing "mother love" into something that would presumably look the same across places and situations, Nazario falls into the trap outlined by Sommer, who warns us away from assuming readerly intimacy, "lest our enlightened and universalizing drives presume to offer a better understanding than [that of the subaltern woman] . . . and lest we therefore proceed to make moral and strategic decisions in her stead" ("Taking a Life" 931). Nazario herself notes in her preface that she hopes Latin American immigrant women who are leaving their children behind will "make better-informed decisions" (xxv) as a result of reading her text (a rather strange hope to articulate, given that the impoverished, and sometimes illiterate, Central American mothers whom she addresses are hardly likely to *read* her text). Though Nazario does not explicitly say so, her narrative framing obviously implies that "better-informed decisions" mean *not* coming to the United States, *not* leaving one's children behind.

The narrative "plot" concludes, accordingly, not with the reunification of Enrique and his mother, but with a different resolution altogether: After visiting her mother in the United States, Lourdes's other grown child, her daughter Belky, "boards an airplane back to Honduras. Back to her son" (267). Through this narrative closure, Nazario privileges not the reunion of mother and child after a long separation, but the *return* of the mother to her young child in Honduras. That this is the "happy ending" with which the narrative concludes its odyssey strongly implies that *the mother's return* is the correct moral and ethical resolution. Belky's son will not be abandoned as Enrique was; the cycle will not repeat. The question of what Enrique's fate might have been in the *absence* of his mother's relocation to the United States for work, however, is never seriously taken up by Nazario.

Paradoxically, Nazario's effacing of the determinant effects of place serves to reinscribe these effects, via a preservation of the U.S. reader's (or journalist's) privileged position and the power it affords to determine "universal" ethical models. Aside from the question of situational specificity, such a rendering elides any sense that the reader "is in any way responsible, whether through commission or omission, for that suffering" (Nance, "Let Us Say" 66); that is to say, it elides U.S. responsibility

for the position of these mothers. Nazario's commitment to family unification might just as easily have led her to engage in an explicit critique of immigration policies—policies that have been allowed to remain in place by a largely indifferent or even actively supportive U.S. electorate. After all, it is such policy initiatives as Operation Gatekeeper and Operation Hold-the-Line that resulted in a “resident” undocumented population much less willing to make return trips across the border (Durand 247), therefore making it *more* likely that mothers would not return to their children. She might have discussed current deportation laws, which have come under widespread fire from immigration rights activist groups such as the New Sanctuary Movement *precisely* because they separate parents from citizen children. Instead, Nazario renders the factors that separate mother from son as primarily a matter of personal shortcomings and flawed decisions, rather than of the reverberations of U.S. immigration policy. Thus even while we are asked to empathize with the separated families of migrants, we are also left secure in our comfortable (and ethically superior) positions as U.S. readers.

#### WHO IS THE “YOU”? ‘THE DEVIL’S HIGHWAY’

Of the three texts under discussion here, Luis Alberto Urrea's *The Devil's Highway* is the most successful both in encouraging empathetic identification and then in relocating readers in their “own place,” in ways that promote exotopy as a grounds for re-evaluation and civic action rather than a mere reinscription of national privilege. *The Devil's Highway* recounts the story of one of the most well-publicized of mass border deaths in the new millennium, in which fourteen men died trying to enter the U.S. by crossing through the Arizona desert in 2001. In this text, the invitation to identification is followed by a move back to the particularities of citizenship and its implications via a reconsideration of immigration policy and border enforcement issues. That is, Urrea draws attention to our (national) place and to forms of civic engagement that it can entail.

*The Devil's Highway* opens with a story that universalizes (or, at least, momentarily abstracts) the experience of its “protagonists,” identified only as “Five men.” Urrea is seemingly determined to postpone for as long as possible identifying information that might designate these men as “Mexican” or as “illegal”; for the moment, all identify-

ing tags are left off. The five men, when their voices are represented, seem to be talking and thinking in English: "They were walking now for water, not salvation. Just a drink. They whispered it to each other as they staggered into parched pools of their own shadows, forever spilling downhill before them: *Just one drink, brothers. Water. Cold water!*" (4). Slowly, as though it were a camera lens, the narrative voice backs away, increasing, ever so slightly, the distance between reader and subject, by making more visible the process of *imagining* what the men imagined: "In the distance, deceptive stands of mesquite trees *must have looked like oases. . . . [It] must have seemed like* another bad dream" (4–5, emphasis added). Instead of hearing immediately the men's whispers, readers have now been removed to the level of conjecture: this is what it *must have felt like*. But in that removal process, readers are also being invited specifically to *engage* in conjecture, to imagine what the men felt. Not until near the end of this introductory scene-setting, in which the men have already been trekking through deadly desert heat for days, does one of the men even speak in Spanish: "*Pinches piedras,*" translated as "Too many damned rocks" (5).

Urrea's invitation to readers to inhabit the perspective of desert crossers unfolds through a strategic shifting and fluidity of pronouns—of the "you" that his text addresses, and an occasional merging of that "you" with the "he" or "they" of his subjects. The first time Urrea makes this narrative move is, interestingly, in his depiction of the U.S. Border Patrol, often a vilified entity for pro-immigrant politics: "Like the other old boys of Wellton Station, you love your country, you love your job, and though you would never admit it, you love your fellow officers . . . . You can always come in to the clubhouse and find someone to talk to. Somebody who votes like you, talks like you" (23). Someone to talk to, in this hypothetical scene, is configured here as *a priori not* the migrants. Readers are shown, as in a mirror, their possible predisposition towards identifying with a comforting "Americanness"; in Urrea's appeal to our sympathies, he begins by allowing readers to occupy a "you" with which Anglo-American readers, at least, might feel an easier initial identification—with someone that speaks in English.

From here, Urrea guides his sympathetic readers to other, potentially more difficult identifications. Just as the narrative of slow death of the border crossers has barely gained traction—Urrea notes that on the morning of the second day of the trek, "they had already begun

to die" (here the undocumented are, however sympathetically, still "they")—he interrupts his narrative, slowing it down: "not only Mexicans die in this desert" (117). He then reverts, for several pages, to stories of "mainstream" U.S. citizens of nondescript ethnicity also dying in the desert. Lisa Scala and Martin Myer went off-roading in sand dunes during a camping trip; the steering arm of their jeep broke, and they died because they could not reach water. Joseph and Laura Popielas "went for a walk in the park" to climb Picacho Peak, and never made it; Joseph was found within sight of their car, which he was probably trying to reach to get help for his wife (119). Urrea concludes this section with the terse statement, "In the desert, we are all illegal aliens" (120), resituating the pronoun "we" so that the former "they" is also included—a "we" with boundaries flexible and fluid enough that "illegal aliens" and U.S. citizens can inhabit it simultaneously.

Urrea now launches into another narrative interruption, in which he asks readers literally to imagine their own deaths in the desert: "Experts can't give a definitive schedule of doom. Your own death is largely dictated by factors outside of your control . . . All sources say you will die in a period of time that can vary from hours to days" (120). Each stage of hyperthermia is described in excruciating and relentless detail, all while using the pronoun "you," directed presumably *at the reader*: "Sooner or later, you understand that you have to drink your own urine" (126). National and racial identifiers are deliberately stripped away: "It doesn't matter what language you speak, or what color your skin" (120). Scenes of increasing disorientation are rendered in second person, as though the reader were experiencing them: "You don't know much anymore. You are confused; your memories are conflated with your dreams. . . . The only clear thought in your mind now is: I'm thirsty, I'm thirsty" (125). From the introduction of the migrants' deaths, to the description of U.S. tourist deaths, to the description of "Your" deaths, the text insistently asks readers to close the distance between migrants and themselves, to imagine desert deaths as something that *could happen to them*.

But of course, the circumstances would be markedly different for readers than for undocumented migrants; dying in the desert as a tourist is not the same exact experience as dying while trying to cross to the U.S. in search of economic subsistence for one's family. Thus, Urrea does not just leave us with facile desert humanism. Rather, from this point

of most intimate identification and empathy, Urrea solicits his readers to move back to exotopy—to their own position as U.S. citizens, and the attendant capacity to act in particular ways to change the ending of the story. (We cannot change it for tourists, but we can, perhaps, for immigrants.) As Nazario does, Urrea includes a segment that apparently “models” ethical behavior; but while Nazario’s description of rural Mexican humanitarians is ultimately subsumed by the thrust of her concluding pages, Urrea’s ethical “modeling” comes near the very end of his text—and in the surprising form of the border patrol. The concluding pages of *The Devil’s Highway* point out that “One thing Yuma and Well-ton [border patrol agents] understood immediately from the disaster in May was that the way things worked didn’t work. If they were to hope for a change in the fate of the Devil’s Highway and all the lost souls walking it, they would have to become proactive, not reactive” (212). He describes a series of towers, built to be visible “day and night” in the desert, with warning signs and panic buttons to summon help (213). Further, although “conservative pundits try to get their constituents to believe [that] the American Taxpayer . . . is funding lifesaving towers foisted on them by the lily-livered INS,” Urrea notes that “In fact, the towers are built, raised, maintained, and paid for out-of-pocket by those bleeding-heart liberals, the Border Patrol agents themselves” (214). As a result of Border Patrol interventions in Yuma, while the migrant death tally in the neighboring Tucson sector for the following season continued to escalate, the Yuma sector brought its total down to *nine* (214). Urrea’s inclusion of this unexpected bit of information might be understood as its own form of rhetorical call to action: if *Border Patrol agents*, so often portrayed as the villains of this story, are willing to pay for towers with their own personal salaries to save the lives of unauthorized migrants what are *you* willing to do?



It is worth observing that this analysis of narratives of undocumented crossings is, of necessity, incomplete. Frances Aparicio has warned against taking “into account only the moment of initial production or the isolated text” without considering “the larger sociopolitical context. . . . The production of meaning, the process of signification in cultural acts, cannot be traced uniquely to a fixed text but will vary according to an array of extra-and intratextual factors” (93). An analy-

sis of the rhetorical and literary shape of texts is, at bottom, an analysis of their *potential* rather than *actual* effects on readers. Extratextual factors will inevitably impact reader reception, including the direction of immigration debates at the time of reading, the prominence of current legislation efforts, recent reports of undocumented deaths, looming economic crises, and other news events receiving media attention. The underlying assumption of this study is that literary texts, as sustained narratives consumed over time and thus significantly engaging the imagination, can have a particular role to play. But literature doesn't exist in isolation. There are books, then there are conversations about books (a cultural phenomenon spawned on a large scale by Oprah's Book Club); and there are also movies, television, news magazines, web sites, etc.—all offering their little piece to the public conversation. There is, alas, no scientific way to predict which books will make waves and which will only create ripples. But perhaps we should not underestimate the power of the ripples.

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#### NOTES

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1. Among other provisions, Arizona's SB 1070, signed into law by Governor Jan Brewer in April 2010, 1) required law enforcement officers to check immigration status if officers have "reasonable" suspicion that the person detained is undocumented; 2) made it a crime for non-citizens to be without their immigration papers; and 3) prohibited undocumented immigrants from seeking work. The law sparked significant outrage and protest from immigrant rights and humanitarian organizations, which claimed that it would lead to racial profiling. It also spurred boycotts of travel to Arizona. Legislation modeled on the Arizona law was proposed in over 30 states, and was passed in five, including Alabama, Georgia, Indiana, South Carolina, and Utah, spurring additional protests and boycott threats. Most of Arizona's SB 1070—but not the highly controversial "show me your papers" provision—was struck down by the U.S. Supreme Court on June 25, 2012.

2. See for instance Francis, Auster, Buchanan, Dougherty, Brimelow, Huntington.

3. We might say that the central difference between *testimonio* "proper" and literary journalism lies in the relationship between "informant" and recorder. Instead of one informant who serves a representative, collective function, there are in these journalistic texts *many* informants who are interviewed or otherwise "documented"



by the interlocutor. Instead of erasing the recorder's tracks to create an "illusion of immediacy" with the subaltern speaker (Sommer, "No Secrets" 131–32), the journalistic narratives I examine foreground the interlocutor's voice, perspective, and interpretive lens.

4. Indeed, the definition of *testimonio* outlined by Cuba's Casa de las Américas when it instituted a new literary prize for the genre in 1970 is so broad that the border-crossing texts I examine here could all, conceivably, qualify as *testimonio*. To be eligible for consideration, *testimonios* must "document, from a direct source, an aspect of reality. . . . By 'direct source' we mean [firsthand] knowledge of the facts by the author, or the collection by the latter of stories or records obtained from the persons in question, or from suitable witnesses" (qtd. in Sklodowska, *Testimonio* 56; my translation).

5. On *testimonio* as a first-person, witness-participant account, see for example Beverley and Zimmerman 173; Yúdice 54. On *testimonio* as giving voice to the subaltern, see for example Beverley 19; Sklodowska, *Testimonio* 58; Yúdice 42; Craft 185; Sommer "No Secrets" 134.

6. Urra's *The Devil's Highway* was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize; the six-part *Los Angeles Times* series upon which *Enrique's Journey* was based won Nazario the 2003 Pulitzer Prize in feature writing; Martínez was awarded a Lannan Literary Fellowship in 2002 after the publication of *Crossing Over*. All three books made several "best books" lists.

7. See for instance the following reviews: Bennett; Bilger; Cowie; Dunham; Manuel Martinez; Medina, "Baptism" and "Families"; Montgomery-Fate; Turakhia; Urra, "Lost"; Wildman; Wilson.

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